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One of the most memorable experiences from my recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land, was walking the Via Dolorosa, the Way of the Cross. Our journey began at the place called Gabbatha, where Jesus was sentenced to death, and where we picked up a modest wooden cross which was about seven feet long. It was not very heavy, was nicely stained and coated, and probably nothing like what Jesus would have carried. And yet, as we moved through the streets of Jerusalem, we realized that it was going to take four of us to carry and maneuver this cross through the narrow and busy city streets. And so we began the Stations of the Cross, in the rain, making our way through crowds, dodging cars, past all kinds of stores and shops. We also began to realize that there was very little regard for what we were trying to do, we were just one more pilgrim band, trying to follow the Way of Jesus. It seemed that if we were not in someone else's way, then maybe we were easy customers, and so shop keepers would call out to us, *free Qurans! Icons and rosaries for sale!*

As the rain became heavier and the road steeper, the Way of the Cross took us through a busy marketplace. It seemed that everything imaginable was available, exotic spices and fruits, rows and rows of metal appliances and utensils that shined in the sun, garments and cloth of every shade and color, displays so close to the road that we nearly knocked one down with the cross. And all of this, punctuated by, and here Jesus met His Mother, here He fell the second time, here Simon of Cyrene is

made to take up Christ's cross, here the women and children of Jerusalem come to Him, here He falls a third time. Only a short distance from the end of the market, we saw where some of the pilgrims had stopped and left their crosses leaning up against the city wall. But we were told to carry ours further. We carried it up a flight of steep stairs, and suddenly realized that we were at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. We placed the cross with a stack of other crosses and stopped down, and climbed into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

One of the great secrets of the Holy Land, and one of the greatest spiritual lessons to be learned there, is that you can see the cave where Jesus was born, you can see Golgotha, the very spot where the cross stood, and you can go into the empty tomb, but in order to see these great sites, you must humble yourself by literally stooping down, there is no other way. The stairs leading to the site of the crucifixion are also incredibly steep, one almost has to crawl up them to see Golgotha. We helped each other up the stairs, lest anyone come so far, and turn back. The reward though for having carried one's cross through the Via Dolorosa, was to see the empty tomb. Again, stooping down, humbling oneself to go in, and only for just a few short moments, is an overwhelming experiences. And this is not because of the decorations that may be in the tomb. There were only maybe a few vigil lamps, and an image of the risen Christ over the spot where Jesus would have laid. But so

overwhelming was the experience that six priests nearly had to be led out of the tomb.

One cannot enter the tomb, or even look into the tomb, and not be changed. The same is true of the cross, one cannot carry their cross and not be changed. We have heard the phrase, there is no Easter Sunday without a Good Friday. No Empty Tomb, without the cross. As Blessed John Keble writes, *keep Good Friday in mind all year long, and you will have a blessed Easter at last*. If we want to truly experience Easter joy, to know the transforming and renewing power of Easter Sunday in our own lives, we must each carry our crosses. To not be changed by carrying one's cross, is to not embrace one's cross at all. We each have a cross to bear, some are visible and some are invisible. Lord willing, we each here today bear the cross of being a Christian in an unchristian world. We carry our crosses daily through the city streets, past those with little to no regard for us or the faith, trying our best to dodge the obstacles and road blocks to our faith, through crowded marketplaces, denying ourselves because we understand the truth of the world, that anything that glitters and shines cannot give us real peace and fulfillment. We follow the footsteps of Jesus through this world, even when others have cast their crosses down. And even though we each have our own crosses to bear, yet we are called to *bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*, to give a hand as our neighbor climbs to Calvary too.

And all along the way, at the very beginning of our journey, and at the end of our journey, we are reminded, and will be reminded that we must become little, we must humble ourselves, and then the journey will be worth it all. How else can we experience the glory of Easter? How else can we know the transcendent power of our Resurrected Lord and Savior? We must become like St. Mary Magdalen, who could not bear to be separated from her Lord. Who came early to the tomb and wept like a child because she could not find Him. And her tears were rewarded. We must become like St. Peter and St. John, and run to the tomb, and see and believe with the eyes of faith. St. Mary Magdalen, St. Peter, and St. John, bore their crosses of following Jesus. They endured the tricks and plots of those who schemed to put Jesus to death for years. St. Peter bore the cross of having denied Jesus three times. They each endured the cross of watching the scourging of Jesus, Jesus carrying His cross while He was mocked and spat upon. They witnessed His crucifixion and death, His body placed in the arms of His mother, and finally laid in the tomb. They endured the cross of crushing defeat Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Because of what they endured, the truth of the Empty Tomb took a while to settle into their minds. But the risen Lord, the Empty Tomb, a new chapter, and a new life in Christ was all the sweeter, because they had borne their crosses. It was by bearing their crosses yet further that they each won the crown of life and the title 'saint.'

Keep Good Friday in mind all year long, and you shall have a blessed Easter at last. Embrace the cross, it is our ladder to heaven. For the Cross of sorrow has been transformed into our Easter Joy.

“O tree of beauty, tree most fair,
Ordained those holy limbs to bear
Gone is thy shame, each crimson bough
Proclaims the king of glory now.”